

Drop In Fifteen

by La Aardvark

Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2011-10-06 04:56:20

Updated: 2011-10-06 04:56:20

Packaged: 2016-04-27 00:03:01

Rating: M

Chapters: 11

Words: 15,135

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A day in the life of a band of ODSTs during a mission to retrieve a SPARTAN II.

1. On Your Mark, Get Set

****Part One: On Your Mark, Get Set...****

"Drop in fifteen."

The voice was that of Max, the Lance Corporal. In a normal squadron, the Gunnery Sergeant would call out that sort of thing, but the 42nd Mobile Orbital Drop Infantry was not really normal. Max was the town crier, more or less, though he wouldn't ever say anything if it wasn't so.

Walking into the room with the rest of the assembled squadron members, Max ran his sable brown eyes over each face once, noting their expressions. There were nine total, and none looked any less ready for this than they had for the last drop, or the one before that. But they seemed to like to look at one another before each drop, as if to be sure they got one last good look before the worst.

With some fifteen minutes to kill before needing to assemble themselves in their HEV pods, the squadron returned to their former occupations. Amanda, in the back, was playing a card game with Elliott, a trooper some twice her size. He didn't seem to be any better at the cards than she was, though.

At the holographic projector table, Connor and James stood discussing the nature of the programming underneath the projected landscape they were looking at. Where normal troops would be discussing layouts and tactics and plans, these two just bickered about the ones and zeros behind the imagery.

Propped up with his feet in the air, Alex-1 looked like he was

asleep... until Alex-2 got ahold of his left boot and yanked it up and off the crate he'd propped it up on, then the two Alexes were in a race around the room as fast as the leader could go. Alex-1 was older, more experienced, and caught his winks where he could. Alex-2 was younger, tended to be more playful, and would prank anyone he could get away with. Within his own squadron, though, this had become difficult, so it was harder to get his teammates to play.

Watching this, and across from the card game and slightly apart from the crates and the projector table and the door through which Max had come, stood Andrew, stout, lanky, but quick as a whip, and Adam, the thinker. Given two minutes, the man could conjure a hundred ways around, through, past, or into anything. The team had been assembled out of the best of the best, without regard to age, sex, disposition or quirk. So that had saddled them with an array of very interesting characters... but all were good at what they did best.

Which would await them at the other end of that drop in fifteen.

"You had an _ace_?" Elliott suddenly complained. "Where were you hiding that thing?"

"Read it and weep." Was all Amanda would say, grinning with an unholy glee. She scooped up Elliott's cards, and stacked them neatly by tapping them edge-on against the tabletop, looking up in time to see the Alexes coming around for another pass.

At a glance to Elliott, the bigger trooper casually stretched out a leg, sending Alex-2 sprawling. It didn't take but a second for Alex-1 to land on him and wrestle him into an arm-lock, leaving him squealing and the other troopers laughing at him. "I got you now, you half-pint!" Alex-1 crowed, triumphant.

"Okay, boys," Amanda interrupted, still grinning. "Time to start grabbing our crap. Don't want to land and remember we forgot something, after all." She dropped the worn cards into their ratty cardboard box, and slipped the top closed over them, before standing up.

The tussle on the floor disassembled on its own, the team rising to and filtering down to the other end of the room, past the crate where Alex-1 had been dozing a moment before. There, they began to outfit with their weapons of choice. Amanda took a 99D-S2 AM model sniper rifle and a pair of M7's, nesting the weapons down into her pod for the trip groundward. Alex-1 pulled down a standard BR55 from the rack, and a .45 Magnum to go with, though he did slip a monomolecular-edged tungsten carbide eight-inch combat knife with a diamond-hone sheath into one boot, just in case things became more than a rifle and pistol could handle.

As Alex-1 propped that leg up to tie off the top of the sheath around his knee, Alex-2 brought down a 12-gauge shotgun and a single M7. Wiggling past Amanda and Alex-2, Max managed to get himself a shotgun as well, though he wiggled back out again to pull open the rack holding the heavy weaponry, and reached past the SPNKR for the W/AV M6 G/GNR, also known in some circles as simply the "Spartan laser". Hefting the massive energy weapon from the rack, he turned and shouldered through the others heading for his pod.

Elliott watched him go, holding his BR55 in one hand, his other on a rack lip, then turned and picked up a pair of .45 Magnums, and promptly followed him. Connor made sure he got that abandoned SPNKR before its feelings got hurt, giving the tubes an affectionate pat as he lifted a pair of the M7's with his other hand. It just wouldn't do to have the explosives get persnickety!

Once Elliott and Connor were out of the way, James could finally fit through. As Amanda and the two Alexes sorted into their own pods, Andrew and Adam took their places at the weapon-rack. James pulled down another of the BR55's, and an M7 sub, and was done. Andrew and Adam both took MA5B assault rifles, though Andrew went with the .45 Magnum and Adam took the very last M7. Before he left, Adam pulled out the other monomolecular combat knife, having become rather fond of the thing for when guns were good for beans and all he needed was a knife.

Outfitted with their guns, James then unsealed the grenade crate Alex-1 had had his feet up on, and passed out pairs to the qualified carriers; Elliott, Connor, and Adam. Nobody else had the aim or the arm-power to make them go far enough and into the right places. This didn't stop the bereft from bemoaning this disqualification's unfairness, though, and it never stopped a single one of them from filching the far more dangerous variety off the bodies of the enemy.

Covenant sticky-grenades were just sooooo much more fun!

2. Houston, We Have A Problem

-**Part Two; Houston, We Have A Problem**

The HEV pods launched one right after another, until all nine were in the air and shooting fast and hot for the upper atmosphere of the world below. During the first twenty seconds following launch, James shot a private channel at Amanda's pod, pinging for update.

"Everything's smooth so far." Amanda reported, running her thumbs over the directional jet joysticks in each hand as she looked down between her knees and out the window on the bottom of the pod. "All pods green."

"They'll turn red soon enough. How's the FNG?"

"Taking it well... you know no ODST is ever really green." Amanda shrugged as she spoke. "Say... who's that getting below me?"

"Think it's Elliott. If not, it's Connor." James answered. "Elliott might be on my left flank. Soundoff?"

"Not so fast, James." Amanda chided. James was the squadron CO, but that didn't put him above scrutiny... and certainly not above being hauled backwards by his britches whenever his second-in-command - Amanda - got it into her head that he needed a course-correction or two. The duo had never actually disagreed, though there were things they did differently from one another. "Give me landfall vectors. Then we'll figure formation and do a correction to make our marks."

"Right. Getting ahead of myself again. There are days when I half suspect you do this job just for the days when I'm not ace and square." James groused, good-naturedly. "Stand by for vectors."

Amanda raised her eyes, focusing through the clarified active-tint visor on the screen to her right. Data streamed across it for a moment, then winked still and displayed only one screen-sized block of it. "Trajectories aren't matched, James. We hit some kind of spatial eddy?"

"That'd be my guess." James answered. "I'm no good at math on the fly."

"Math, heh. Every one of us could die on impact in these damn things and math be damned." Amanda scoffed. "Give me auto. I think I can get us more or less straight without kissing asses."

"You sure about that, Amanda?" James asked, sounding skeptical. "At current atmospheric entry speeds, if two of us do bump, that's the end of both."

"I know. But if we don't group up now, we'll sprinkle halfway down the damn southern seaboard and that Spartan can kiss himself goodbye."

"And if you miss even once we'll lose two men!" James protested. "Screw this one up and we are done. I'll see to it you never forget this."

Amanda's mouth twisted into an unrepentant feral grin. "I'll remind you you said that, James, when we all hit dirt in the same spot." As the control interface winked green, she began pulling their formation inward, adjusting just by millimeters so that the adjustments wouldn't cause them to land on top of one another or meet in mid-air some hundred or so feet above ground. Once the last one had been tucked in, she flipped the controls off, and shunted the command line back to James' pod. "All better."

"Until the next eddy." James mentioned, coolly. Just a moment after he was done speaking, ground fire began to zip upwards through their formation. "Ooh, pretty."

Amanda said nothing, looking down again through the window between her boots. Ground based anti-air fire meant the pods were getting close to the surface. And the time for corrections was drawing painfully slim... if anything happened now, they'd just have to regroup.

All of them were watching, all aware that making their pods dance to try to avoid the fire would only increase the likelihood of disaster, not decrease it. No one said anything, their collective attentions riveted on the streaks of tracer fire following each round into the sky.

James opened the channel so the rest of the pods could hear too, then. "Groundfall in eight. Live well, men."

Everyone hoo-ah-ed with enthusiasm in reply.

At the conclusion of the breath it took to hoot the hoo-ah, the anti-air changed tunes. James sucked in an involuntary breath when the shell exploded close enough to his pod to rattle him in it, shoving him sideways in the concussive blast and giving him a heart-stoppingly close view of a fellow pod as he got too close for comfort. The explosions got quicker in succession as the pods neared the surface, until finally, a pod was struck full-on.

James heard only a partial shriek before the radio went dead, but he already knew which pod that had been... Amanda's. "Brace for impact! Prepare for immediate engagement!" It was all he could say at this point.

3. Regroup And Hit Rendezvous

-**Part Three; Regroup And Hit Rendezvous**

Impact jarred everyone to the absolute core of their bones. As the doors on the pods fired off like flattened cannon rounds and the ODSs piled out into the hot summer sunlight, chaos ensued promptly. Though scattered at first for their landing, the Covenant in the area were still quite close by, and all the cover there was anywhere near anyone were the pods themselves.

It was theorized that an HEV pod could take a Wraith mortar round and still be HEV-pod shaped. This did nothing for the mention of the atmospheric disturbance surrounding said pod, nor the unfortunate circumstances of anyone trying to use it as cover. Alex-1 got hung in his pod's lower lip and splashed onto his face in the blindingly white dust, but while the mishap was entirely unintentional, it did save his armor from a dozen peppering shots of plasma from the Grunts rushing inward on him. Instead, they set his seat inside the pod on fire.

Annoyed, he retrieved both guns from inside as quickly as he could, then ducked around behind the thing to get himself situated and loaded up. Unfortunately, on the other side were a pair of Elites, one with a sword, the other with a Carbine. Thankfully, the one with the Carbine was behind the one with the sword, and the swing gave Alex-1 the time he needed to put finger to trigger. Dodging an elongated arm (that would halve you) was one thing... dodging self-depreciating, self-propelled rifle rounds was wholly another! He tucked his head, rolled over it, came back onto a knee and fired his battle rifle point-blank at the attacking Elite.

In that moment, Alex-1 learned two things. The first was that point-blank meant he was somehow within the amorphous barrier of the Elite's energy shields, and when they flared, it jerked his gun out of his hands and smacked him in the visor with it. The second was that point-blank was still not good enough to kill an Elite with just three rounds.

Knocked onto his rear by the kinetic rejection, Alex-1 caught his rifle and scrambled to grip it correctly again before the equally as punished Elite could recover. The alien was not on the ground, but staggered was good enough for Alex-1. He'd just gotten his BR55 up and aimed, his finger on the trigger again, one boot slipped under his rump and that leg propelling him upwards off the ground, when he

saw a fellow troopmate appear through the blowing white dust.

Max's shotgun belched four consecutive rounds at once, one into the Carbine-wielder, the other three into the rattled sword-wielder. The sword-wielder went down with more holes than he'd been born with, but the other Elite just got back up and swung the butt-end of his Carbine at Max's head.

While Max ducked, Alex-1 let go of his BR55 with one hand, yanked up his magnum and emptied the clip into the Elite's side. With broken shields and a couple of holes in his hide, the Elite spun about to roar indignantly at Alex-1. Barely was the sound out than the fifth shotgun round split his head open.

"That one just didn't want to die!" Max exhaled, racking the pump. "Come on, we got to move, there's buttloads more."

"That is why you're the FNG, Max." Alex-1 answered, grumpily. He reloaded both weapons on the fly, chasing after Max as they ascended a hill that neither had been able to tell was a hill until they set boot to it. The blowing dust made both men grateful for their sealed visors, but it still royally screwed with visibility. All either really knew was that the rest of the firefight was happening in that direction... which just so happened was also upwards.

Max found the rock first, running bodily into it and giving it an involuntary hug. "Ugh!"

"What are you - " Alex-1 began, right before he tripped over a second only to drop and straddle a third. "Oahu!"

Shaking his head to get the stars out of it, Max didn't have time to laugh at Alex-1's choice of words... their introduction was made, and down through the rocks came a pair of plasma grenades. Sucking in a fast breath, Max called out, "Grenade!"

Alex-1 wasn't sure what else to do - he tucked his elbows into the rock he was sprawled across and yanked himself up and over it, tucking down into a ball on the far side. Not a moment later, the two plasmas went off, scorching the air and everything in it. But on his new side of the rock, fire was coming in from what seemed to be three directions. Most of it was going by, but not all.

As he jumped free of the rock onto what he hoped was flat or at least level ground, he brought his BR55 up and aimed at the source of several large plasma shots. Firing there earned him some plasma rounds of his own, but while he never saw what it was he was shooting at, he found ducking the plasma was not that hard to do. Off to his right was his teammate, shooting a shotgun into the dust. "Max!"

"You found Max?" It wasn't Max, but Alex-2.

"Once." Alex-1 answered, turning out of the way of some bright plasma, only to get stitched across the front by three long red metal spikes. At the impact of each, he staggered, until the third knocked him over.

"Alex!" Alex-2 yelled, ducking himself at the waist and even crouching just a bit to avoid another fleet of the things. "Since

when did Brutes and Elites fight in the same damn spot!"

"I'm good!" Alex-1 gasped, out of breath. He started to roll upwards when a hand grabbed him from behind and hefted him up for him.

"What's our head-count?" It was Elliott. Spinning away from Alex-1 as he found his balance again, he unloaded his BR55's entire clip into several emerging Grunts. The dust swirling through the bright, hot air was only getting thicker, and so was the live fire going everywhere. "We got to move out! Nobody can see in this crap!"

"We got four just now!" Alex-2 answered. "Where are the others?"

"I got a nav marker but radios are useless in this dirt!" Elliott yelled back, trying to be heard over a sudden howl of wind. The sound revved up before it died back, but it never completely went away. If the world was trying to scrape them off, it was doing a dandy job.

"Where's Max?" Alex-1 asked, tucking his shoulders forward to try to get his rifle up past the spikes. He didn't have time to yank them yet, but in the meantime they were in the way in a major fashion.

"Here!" The voice came up out of the rocks where he and Alex-1 had come up from a moment before, and with HUD nav points on each of them, they grouped up and began to run through the gritty storm after the only one that wasn't close enough to touch. Just to be sure the party they were leaving wasn't going to follow in the correct direction, Elliott yanked the pin out of a frag and threw it behind them.

"Take that, you invisible suckers!" Elliott added, just for emphasis.

Trying to navigate rocks to find the end of the nav-rainbow was hard, but every time they thought they found a flat spot, they'd get tangled up in more rocks. At one point it proved a bad situation when somehow, their calamity earned the accurate attention of a pair of Grunts with good throwing arms.

With grenades going off in seeming all directions, the foursome got out the other end by the skins on their teeth alone. When the Grunts went suddenly silent, the four looked up to see Connor skidding down a stone slope to meet them. He stuck his two M7's out at them for a second, before dropping his aim. "Hey, guys! Seen the Sarge?"

"Not yet." Elliott answered, slapping his gun to try to dislodge any dust that might have crawled up the barrel. "Hate this storm." Another howl roared past, seeming to go from right to left, but the nature of it earned it all five sets of guns tracing its path... was there something making that sound, and not just funneling winds?

"We better move out." Connor advised. "Got a direction, Elliott?"

"One nav point... it's weak and keeps fading out, but we were getting closer when you showed up." He stuck an arm out in the mentioned direction, and as if on cue, all five started moving again. "And

someone yank those damn spikes out of Alex."

"Huh?" Alex-1 blurted, alarmed. "Wait a minute!" But Connor had fallen in beside him already, and with one arm levered against Alex-1's shoulder, he jerked the first spike out of the man's chest armor with a single pull. It still sent Alex-1 staggering forward right in the middle of his trotting step, though, and almost made him fall. "Agh!"

4. You Thought I Was WHAT?

-**Part Four; You Thought I Was WHAT?**

Elliott found the sharp drop first, but he didn't even have enough time to yelp in surprise before all five of them had piled right off the edge after him. It was a blessedly short drop to the bottom, though, and suitably padded with soft, silty sand that was blowing just as hard as all the rest of it. This close, though, no one could miss the towering door set into the rock face.

Pushing off the pile, Alex-2 got stood up first, but while he backed into the rock face and leaned there, and the others disentangled themselves and stood up, too, he looked around and saw something starting to emerge out of the sand from somewhere flatside of their cliff-door.

"Guys! Company!" He raised his shotgun, wary, but lowered it again when he recognized the outline of the first one. "Sarge!"

James trotted out of the sandy curtain with Amanda and Adam in tow, but as soon as they got near the door, it automatically slid back, opening. Sans greetings or questions, all present spun around to aim their weapons into the doorway.

"What's in there?" Max eventually asked.

"Well... we're about to find out." James decided, on the fly. He started forward. "Visibility has got to be better in there anyway." In twos, the rest of the team followed him.

"Everyone here?" Amanda asked, looking over the dark visors and trying to count the moving men.

"I think we're missing Andrew." Alex-1 answered. "He wasn't with us and I don't see him with you."

"I never saw him... the sand was really bad where my pod hit and so was the Covenant. I don't know how they knew what they were shooting at wasn't theirs." Connor put in.

"Yeah, same here." Alex-2 added. "One of the pods was hit on the way in, though..."

"That was mine." Amanda told him. "All it did was scare me half to death and jam the firing pins in the door."

"Should we really be leaving him by himself out there?" Max asked, skeptical. "There were a whole bunch of enemy I couldn't see through all the dirt in the air out there."

"If he is he'll be fine. He's smart and he knows what he's doing." James answered, sounding grim. All of them knew he was concerned too, not knowing the fate of one of his men, but no one questioned. His comment had not been wrong, after all.

"He better be alright." Amanda muttered, running her eyes over the interior of the corridor connecting the door to the inside of the cliff. As they walked along the cut crystal floor and past the ribbed metal walls, the corridor itself shaped like an upright arrowhead, the ODST squadron could only try to step lightly and wonder where they were.

Ahead of the very first open chamber they came to, though, the echoing sounds of gunfire - Human gunfire - changed it from weird, mysterious and a little out of place to just one more battleground for all of them. As one, the squadron sprinted across the chamber, dodging stationary pilings and blunt obtrusions to make the far exit and through. The sound of the battle grew louder before it clarified into individual shots of plasma and metal bullets, and the squadron had to navigate another crooked, glass corridor before they found the action.

Elites were making a stand over several dozen fallen Grunts, four dead Jackals and two fallen of their own creed. All four were hiding behind the freestanding cover, but plasma hits on the far side of the room only made the material glow. It didn't vaporize, melt away, slag down, or even shatter. It just got warm, then cooled again in the same shape and form it had been before. It didn't even take bullet scarring from the Human weaponry peppering it around the Elites.

The telling buzz of a fully automatic MA5B would send the Elites all ducking for cover, but with a side-entrance, that cover was as good as useless as the squadron-minus-one flew into the room and blew down the last four Elites.

Stepping around the corner of his cover, Andrew stuck the barrel of his assault rifle into the air and heaved a visible breath. "Oh, good. I was almost out."

"Of ammo, or targets?" James laughed.

5. Ooh, Tell Me It Ain't So

-**Part Five; Ooh, Tell Me It Ain't So**

Clear of the raging sandstorm outside, the ODST squadron began to pick up resonant pings of sound and signal from the crystallized walls around them. Much of what was on the radio sounded Covenant, but the faint, punctuated hum on the air suggested they were doing more than just blubbering at one another in that odd alien language.

"That sounds rather ominous to me." Connor decided, grumpily. "Sarge, which way do we go?"

"I picked up that the Spartan got run down here before we arrived." Andrew put in, sounding cautious of speaking loud enough to echo. "So my guess would be not the way I came in and not the way you guys came

in. Other than that... it's a toss up."

James looked from one to the other, then focused past both, watching as each of the other three available passageways produced a member of his team. When the first one stepped up close, he asked, "What's it look like?"

"More of the same, sir." Alex-1 answered, sounding put out.

"Ditto." Alex-2 agreed, though with a bit less grouching. "It's all metal and cut crystal and in those weird shapes, but none of the sounds got any louder the deeper I went... and it's all empty. No tracks or anything."

"No, no tracks where I went either." Alex-1 bobbed his head.

"What creeps me is that this place is so empty, and there are no cobwebs or dust piles or anything at all." Connor decided. When the final wayward scout arrived, he said,

"Got news. Our friends are behind door number three. Thing is... it's a maze down there. If we find anything inside of a year, I'd be surprised." Elliott shook his head. "Sorry, Sarge, but we're gonna have to split up."

"Someone give Andrew some ammo and let's move out." James decided. "Elliott, Amanda, Alex... no, the other Alex." He waved at one dismissively and pointed at the other. "You three are Tag Team. Andrew, Connor, the first Alex. You three are Delta. Max, Adam and I will be Red Team. When we get to a place to split up, I'll let you know. Let's move." He shouldered between Connor and Elliott, heading for where the latter trooper had emerged a moment before.

As the others followed, a couple could be heard to grumble about the teams' member setup. While all of it was audible as phonetic sounds, none of it came out clearly enough to be heard as discernable words. By the first juncture, though, it was silent, and only the sound of boots on the crystalline floor could be heard.

Across a large chamber with a glass-paned center room, the corridor split to go right and left. The ambient sound seemed to come from the righthand one more than the left, so for the moment the nine did not split up... given how far in they would need to go, that was likely a good idea.

Finally, down a squared spiral crystalline ramp, through another broad chamber with a consecutive circular chamber in the middle and down another long corridor, it split again, this time in three directions.

All three seemed to harbor equal amounts of the same noise... but here it was just a touch more defined so it sounded like shouting and muted gunfire. James waved Delta left, Tag forward and then went right. Their primary weapons in hand, the three teams moved quickly into a trot, each one seeking the source of the commotion.

Amanda's team found it first. Around the very first bend, some idle Covenant troops stood watching the tail end of a firefight with their backs turned to the emerging ODSs. Elliott and Amanda split left and right and each one reached past the pointed tanks of inattentive

Grunts and captured the alien's heads in their hands, jerking them almost in tandem to snap the unsuspecting alien's necks. In the middle, Alex-2 rushed up between them and behind the inattentive Elite, and he quickly reached forward and jerked a pair of plasma grenades from the tall alien's hip.

Feeling the tug, the alien spun around, but seeing Alex-2 so very close spooked it before it could react properly, and in a single moment both Amanda's twin submachine guns and Elliott's battle rifle began to spew bullets in tandem. Wisely, Alex-2 just tucked both hands over his helmet and ducked into a crunched kneeling position as the rounds buzzed by overhead.

Overwhelmed, the Elite staggered backwards until his shields broke, then gave a roar of pain as the bullets shattered his armor and dug holes through his flesh. Before either ODST had to reload, he was down for the count, oozing alien ichor. As Amanda and Elliott snatched for fresh magazines, the formerly inattentive aliens watching the firefight ahead of them streamed inward, seeing at first only two Humans scrambling for reloads.

They charged ahead, only to be stopped in their tracks when a third seemed to fold up out of the floor at the dead Elite's feet and sling a pair of sizzling hot mini-suns at them. Alex-2 was not the greatest throwing arm in the team, as was made plain by his disqualification to carry frags, but he was good enough at short range with the adhesive alien explosives that he nailed a Jackal with one on the knuckles and an Elite with the other in the belly.

The Jackal went absolutely nuts and fled back into the mass of his fellows, blowing more than a few of them to bits as a result. The Elite just shook his arms in the air and bellowed in protest at his sealed fate... and then promptly exploded, just a touch too close to Alex-2 for good health.

It did put an explosion at the front and at the back of the incoming Covenant troops, however, and as Alex-2 was blown backwards onto the floor, the disoriented enemy scattered outward looking for cover rather than pressing the attack.

"Alex!" Amanda called, ducking forward and tucking both M7's into one hand as she reached for her troopmate. He caught her arm guard as she dragged him back, but he was still too disoriented and dizzy to be good for much as Elliott proceeded to put bullets downrange wherever he saw alien bodyparts. Dumping Alex behind Elliott, she first frisked through his battle-rattle looking for injury, but when the cursory, quick examination turned up nothing immediate, she left him there and joined Elliott in the fight. They split up again, advancing and using the cover available to punctuate their motions. By the time Elliott had gotten around the first freestanding block and flattened three Grunts and Amanda had come around another to kick a crouched Elite in the back of the head, Alex-2 had gotten his wits back and gotten stood up.

He darted forward, shotgun in hand, and when Amanda was elbowed back, he stepped forward and blew a gaping wound channel through the Elite's unshielded throat.

Not a millisecond later, Alex-1, Connor and Andrew came pelting into the room from behind the first three ODST's, each hollering something

different but all variations of the same - rear-assault incoming. With the immediate Covenant assets disoriented, disorganized and missing several of their commanders, the six shock troopers were able to push the remaining aliens back far enough to get a foothold in the chamber with several of the freesanding crystal-coated blocks between them and their entrance.

Barely had they done so then the first two Elites charged through the doorway into the short entrance corridor, running fast with intent to catch their escaped prey. Behind them, more Elites and a fleet of Grunts followed.

"Somehow, I doubt we have enough ammo for this!" Amanda yelled, in the middle of a pair of M7 magazines. She was spraying the entire front rank, trying to keep them disorganized and unfocused for the more precise actions of the teammates around her. Elliott rolled out a quick frag, sending the thing off near the righthand wall to avoid having it kicked back at them.

"I certainly didn't pack for a large army, no!" He answered.

"Where did they come from?" Alex-2 asked, ducking behind a block to quickly stuff shells into his shotgun.

Tucked around the opposite corner of the same block, Alex-1 answered, "Behind us, where else?"

As the grenade went off, cutting the back out of the front rank, several shields popped at once and a hail of human weapons fire sliced down the remaining forward advance. However, this didn't solve much when that was not the only advance to be had. Cleared of a way through, the second wave piled in... and simultaneously, six of the front Grunts slid in the fresh blood and landed hard on their rumps, their guns skyward.

"Where is James?" Amanda called.

"We didn't see him!" Connor called back, hastily reloading one of his own pair of M7 subs. "He might have gotten through but if not, they're squashed between whatever they found and this new batch!"

"How many are there?" Elliott asked, belting out the last of his BR's magazine and swiping another as he hit the eject switch on the side of the rifle. Barely was the old one out than the new was in, and he racked the action bar and started firing again. "We can't hold this position forever, and we didn't pack for heavy engagement anyway!"

"Something tells me we have bigger problems, guys..." Connor injected, twisted about to see behind them.

Risking a glance behind him, Elliott dropped his aim. "Oh, bollocks."

6. Damn Thing Keeps Jamming!

-**Part Six; Damn Thing Keeps Jamming!**

"Seal that door!" James couldn't hear his own self yelling anymore, but it wasn't so much the percussive sounds of constant grenades going off around them. It was more the lancing beams of punishing energy slamming into and etching gouges into the walls. If there was nothing else going to mar the otherworldly architecture here, then Hunter guns would do the trick.

The crystal shattered over James' head, the fractured chunks sharp as knives and raining down in a billion particles to plink off his armor and sprinkle around him. They crunched as he ran over them, but the next time he raised his BR55 to fire it, the alien in his sights was unaffected and the rounds tore out of the barrel only to slam into his own shoulder, spinning him out and dropping him. "Agh!"

"Sarge!" The sound of Adam's voice was faint under the roar of another lancing beam of Hunter fire, but the trooper landed on his kneepads next to James almost instantly. Grabbing a hold by a belt on his gear, Adam hauled James back and slung him behind cover. Mainly unhurt - though badly unbalanced - by the betrayal of his weapon, James took a moment to see why that had happened. Risking a peek down the barrel of his gun, he found crystal fragments all down the barrel, most of them blown out by the first three rounds he'd fired into himself.

"Dammit, I don't need that." He groused, turning it barrel-down and slapping it like he meant to break it. "Get out of there." He got the gun up and held it around the corner of the block he was now behind to fire blindly - mostly to see if the crystal was cleared out enough to not shoot his own self anymore - at the Covenant.

He heard a Grunt squeal in terror as the unmistakable hiss of a tank being punctured screamed through the corridor. A heartbeat later, the thing exploded, shredding everything around it and either killing or wounding the Hunter. Either way, it quit firing right away.

James pushed back to his feet, slapping his battle rifle again just to be sure, but when he looked up, he didn't see anything downrange. Beside him, Adam cast him a glance, then rolled on a shoulder to see past the corner of the block himself. Right as he did so, a thick beam of searing, roaring energy grabbed him by the chest and flung him straightaway backwards, slamming him into the far wall some ten meters away. James jerked away from the blast, alarmed. "Adam!"

All the crystal on that wall fractured into a spiderweb design, but when the beam shut off and the trooper crumpled to the ground, it did not collapse on top of him. Smoke coiled from Adam's gear, most of it sooted over if not completely melted out or vaporized altogether.

"Adam!" James insisted, leaning forward to go to him but hesitating at the thought of being picked off if he dared. Looking the other way, he spied Max. "Max! Cover me!"

"You got it, Sarge!" Max answered, dropping his shotgun onto the sling and tugging it over his shoulder and head. Once it was secured, he dragged the laser off his back and rolled the safety off, and lifted the hubs off the caps. Well aware of the timing he had to pull it off, he stuck a hand out at James, all fingers up. Then he folded them over one at a time.

Starting again, he promptly stopped to heft his laser to his shoulder, and started the primer. A dot of red light struck the ground at James' boot, and steadily began to build in luminescence. As with all red light, it could not be seen from the side, and the Covenant didn't know what was about to hit them. It did, however, make James a bit antsy to have that dangerous weapon pointed at him while it was priming.

As the last of the primer wound down, Max suddenly leaned out of cover and plopped squarely over onto the floor on his shoulder, right out in plain sight. He pointed the laser downrange, took a lightning fast assessment of what he could see, then aimed the final priming light dot at the Hunter. As the glow in its own laser cannon lit up, aimed right back at him, Max's Spartan laser abruptly opened the shunts and discharged a heavy, deadly blast squarely into the Hunter's midsection, causing all the symbiotic worms to explode in all directions, disassembling the creature. The gun clattered to the floor, draining of the energy buildup, then began to go cold.

As the blast occurred, James was diving forward, aimed straight for Adam. Catching him, he reversed momentum quickly and hauled ass for the cover he'd just vacated. He could take the time to see if Adam was even still alive once he got there. Max rolled onto his back as soon as the shot was out, and sat up fast to get back behind cover, dropping the warm laser into his lap to look over at the Sergeant.

"He alright?" Max asked.

"Keep an eye on those Covenant, Max." James instructed, tugging Adam over to lie face-up. All the armor was cooked off his chest, leaving a gaping hole through his outfit. Some blood had pooled in one spot, but it didn't look arterial and it wasn't still coming out, so James took that on faith to mean nothing internal had become external. Jerking a glove off, he flipped up the latches on Adam's helmet and checked his throat for a pulse. He sagged in relief. "This day is getting worse and worse."

"Sarge, I think we better move..." Max advised, gathering his feet beneath him and starting to stand up. When a plasma shot slapped the metal face in front of him, he jumped cleanly out of his skin, emitting a squeak of protest in the process. He spun about where he was, to find himself staring at several Elites and a phalanx of Jackals coming up from behind them. "Sarge, make that now!" He dove at James, caught him, and jerked backwards on him, lifting him to his feet.

Since he was still hanging onto Adam, this lifted all three of them. Taking the rolling momentum as much as he could, James hauled Adam off the floor and onto his shoulders, then turned around the block and ran as fast as he could right through the ranks of scattered Covenant they'd been shooting at.

Max ran backwards behind him, bleeding shotgun shells at the flanking enemy until they were too far out of range despite their pursuit to be worth it. Then he just shot at the ones he was passing, and hoped nobody got wise and reached out to stick him with a grenade on his way past.

As he ran under his load, James toggled his radio. "This is Red Team,

we got flanked and Adam is down! We need backup! I repeat, we've been flanked and Adam is down!" Static washed over the channel, in defiance of his desperation. "Dammit! Come on, somebody answer! Tag Team, Delta, any of you hear me?"

Ahead were Covenant, gathering their wits, recovering fast. Behind there were more Covenant, chasing them through the ranks of their own. And right when James needed his team the most, all there was was static.

7. The Mission Is Officially FUBAR

-**Part Seven; The Mission Is Officially FUBAR**

Alex-2 had just gotten his M7 sub reloaded and was about to belt out the contents of the fresh mag into the face of a Grunt when a Jackal stepped in front of the alien and his bullets were deflected off the Jackal's shields. He ceased fire and ducked back around his cover, a support pylon under a ventilation chute that was up against the wall. Anywhere else in the immediate vicinity was flanked, and the situation had turned into a free-for-all spree with everyone running helter skelter every which way trying not to get shot.

More often than not, the runs ended in sudden death that the deceased never got to identify the source of. Thankfully, the only one to drop so far on their own team was Alex-1, but the circumstances surrounding that incident had more saved him than condemned him; the spike holes in his armor had funneled the plasma blast on his chest down under the armor, and it knocked him flat so all the rest of the bullets meant to end him flew on past harmlessly.

He still thrashed and clawed at his armor while howling agonizingly, but he was still alive and really not that badly hurt. Unwilling to try to engage the Jackal - or the Grunt, for that matter - again immediately, Alex-2 glanced the other way around his cover and then bolted from it, darting halfway across the room to come up behind an Elite as it was turning around.

He reached up and socked the alien in the mandibles with the butt of his gun, startling it and knocking it backwards a step. As it righted itself, Alex-2 darted away, circling the freestanding block to come around behind the Elite yet again. Somehow, it knew to turn back around, only to get socked yet again in the mandibles with the same gun. That time it bleated a word as it jerked backwards, still quite disoriented by what was happening to it.

Alex-2 just disengaged and ran away again.

The Elite turned around again, this time with its plasma rifle up and mentally prepared for a sock to the jaws, only to swing its face right into the choke of a shotgun. Alex-2 didn't stay to watch as the Elite's brains slicked off the block before moving on, but he stumbled right into Amanda on her way up towards him. The two hooked shoulders, spun around one another and went at a ninety-degree angle from their original vectors. Amanda found Connor and Alex-2 met up with Andrew, and the two pairs stepped out together to mow down a small huddle of Grunts coming down the middle.

Plasma rained in from the back, but before much damage could be done,

Alex-1 appeared next to the farthest Elite on the left and stuck his monomolecular combat knife up through the base of the alien's face into its brain. Jerking the blade out again, he circled the falling alien with a spin, coming around and up with the knife into the shield generator on the back of the second.

He got elbowed by that one when its shields spluttered and died, but from the floor he whipped up his magnum and emptied the clip into the alien's head. Rather than falling, that one was grabbed and shoved out of the way, to collapse dead against the wall in an awkward fold. Alex-1 had to roll over his own head in a quick tuck to avoid being kicked by the incoming Elite, but his evasion didn't get him far enough. He got to his knees and had leapt upwards when his leap was cut short by a hand closing around his trailing arm and jerking him backwards.

He dropped the empty magnum in an attempt to bring the combat knife back around, but it was swatted from his hand by the hot, glowing end of the plasma rifle. "Nghah!" Alex-1 protested, bringing a leg up to kick the elbow attached to the hand that had ahold of him. "Let go of me, you split-chinned bastard!"

The Elite just snarled and hauled back to throw him overhanded at the wall. Alex-1 choked when he hit, tumbling to the floor in a gasping heap. The Elite stalked after him, closed a hand around his helmet and hauled upwards, tucking the business end of his plasma rifle up under Alex-1's chin. The firing stud depressed and the knife embedded in the side of the Elite's neck at the exact same moment, causing Alex-1 to get dropped at an angle with a plasma burn across the side of his neck. The Elite grabbed the handle of the knife protruding from its own neck, and turned to see where it had come from, only to take a double-three-round burst in the face, putting it down. Elliott dropped the aim of his BR and darted to where Alex-1 sat crumpled over, pushing him against the wall to look him over. "Hey, you alright?"

Alex-1 got in a pained wheeze, but said nothing.

"Hold on, Connor found an empty side exit, we're taking it. I'll get you out of here." Pulling one of Alex-1's arms over his shoulders, Elliott stood up, and retreated back the way he'd come.

On her way through the same area, Amanda bent mid-step to yank the knife from the Elite's neck, before following the men through the tangled maze and to the hidden passageway. It dipped low into a bridge that went under an energy beam that looked like a power conduit of some advanced kind, then rose up towards another landing that was hung over a deep chasm that didn't have a visible bottom.

While at first none of the surviving Covenant followed their stealthy retreat, the beleaguered team found more of the same once they came out the other end. The majority were Jackals and Grunts, but the architecture here was more to the tune of a long, broad corridor punctuated in the middle by matching pylons that looked like tuning forks. At the top of each tuning fork was suspended another of the tubeless energy conduits. This did not necessarily leave a whole lot of room for cover or maneuvering.

Out ahead, Connor blew down the first rank of Jackals with their

shields in the wrong positions with his M7 submachine guns, but as the rest of the Grunts fled in mock terror, he dropped both in favor of hauling the SPNKR over his head off his back when he saw something bigger.

Hunters.

The rocket launcher met his shoulder in both hands with the zoom lens flipped out before the lancing branch of energy swept him away.

"_Connor!_" Amanda screamed, jumping out into the middle of the fray to snatch the flying ODST out of the path of the beam, and tucked around him for the tumble to the floor. He grabbed her, choking and smoking at once, but the rocket launcher had spun out in the other direction. Coming hastily around the other side of the first tuning fork, Alex-2 scooped it up even before it had quit spinning around and shouldered it. He leveled the aim as he came around the corner of the second tuning fork, so the instant he got the Hunters in sight, he lit out both rockets, then ducked away before the responding beam could sweep him away, too.

The first beam was interrupted when the rockets hit home, the blast shredding the fore of the first Hunter and causing the back half to topple and shred onto the floor in a writhing mass of orange worms.

"Elliott! Give me some cover!" Amanda called, grabbing Connor by his web gear and hauling upwards on the bigger trooper. She began a backwards shuffle towards the backside of the first tuning fork as Elliott and Alex-2 peppered the remaining Hunter with distracting fire. They danced right and left, right and left, trying to close the gap as they went.

Finally, Elliott came around the side of the symbiotic alien and as it turned to face him, the main gun aglow, Alex-2 popped out behind it and shot it nearly point-blank with the only rocket he'd taken the time to reload. Empty again, he ducked away, the Hunter wounded but still active.

Realizing this, Elliott backed off too, tucking around the corner of the first available tuning fork to quickly reload his battle rifle. "Make it fast, Alex!" He called. He looked up in time to see the Hunter had followed him, and ducked straight flat to the floor in time to miss being swiped off his boots by the metal shield in the Hunter's other hand. "Alex! Make it right now!" He tucked quick and rolled to the side, scrambling from his knees back to his feet and running flat out for all he was worth. "Alex! Now, man, now!"

The sound of the Hunter's massive gun warming all the way up and starting to belch the first couple of terrawatts sounded through the chamber, and then the Hunter exploded in fire and orange worm-bits, the gun's aim twisting off to one side and lancing a gouge in one of the tuning forks' upper branches.

"Is that all of them?" Amanda called out.

"Looks like it for now. I can't say what this chamber really looks like on the blueprints though, so I don't wanna linger." Alex-2 answered, trotting back. "How's Connor?"

She looked up as he and Elliott arrived at the same time. "Bleeding, but I got foam in him so he'll last." Propped against the foot of the second tuning fork, Connor waved a hand weakly at the others. "One of you get Alex, I don't want any more surprises."

"Have any of you tried to radio the Sarge yet?" Alex-2 asked, as he took an arm and Elliott took the other of Alex-1 and lifted. Beside them, Andrew kept vigil, his assault rifle held tightly at the ready in his hands.

"I did, it's all static down here. I couldn't even get the Covenant frequencies to play anymore." Amanda reported. She pulled Connor to his feet and tucked one of his arms around her shoulders to keep him there. "Let's move."

8. Glomp And Hug

-**Part Eight; Glomp And Hug**

Max got ahead of the Sergeant and blew a hole in the Jackal's shields, then flattened the Jackal with one to the chest. The two Grunts with it broke ranks and fled, wailing, leaving the narrow corridor mostly to the three ODST's. Spinning back around behind James, Max sent his last confiscated plasma grenade into the doorway they'd passed through, and shredded the Elite standing in it trying to shoot them down. Orange blood splashed atop the purple, allowing Max to note that he'd gotten more than just the one alien with that throw.

Now in front, James began to despair at the sheer length of the ruler-straight corridor he was in. Their weaponry wouldn't do enough damage at that kind of range - ah, where was Amanda with her SRS when he needed her? - and surely they would never make it to the far end or wherever the next corner was before they were cut down. It didn't help that Adam was a lump of unresponsive meat at the moment, too.

Just as he wished his brilliant thinker would wake up and give him some ideas, James spotted a ventilation shaft over his left shoulder high on the wall of the arrowhead-shaped corridor. Flush perfectly with the wall it was set into, it was invisible from the angle he'd viewed it at at first, but now it looked very much man-sized, if a bit too high off the floor for ready access.

"Quick, Max, give me a hand before they come and see us!" James exclaimed, turning to look back at the rookie.

Max spotted the shaft as soon as he'd turned around, and thankfully did not need the idea explained to him. He managed to jump and catch the lip of the shaft with one hand, and hauled himself up into it. Once in, he laid down and reached down for Adam, and then for James. Barely had James gotten inside the vent than the clamor of aliens wondering where they had vanished to met their ears.

"Move, move." James hissed, trying to be quiet. They both grabbed an arm on Adam and lifted, then darted into the dark depths of the shaft. Neither were especially willing to turn on their lights right away, but before they had gone five meters, the floor suddenly

vanished out from under their scampering steps, and all three plummeted.

The two who knew what had just happened both screamed unashamedly.

Looking up, Andrew asked, "You guys hear that?"

Amanda and Elliott turned halfway to look back at him in time to witness him leaping nimbly out of the way as James crashed to the floor from the faraway place overhead, but in his surprise at seeing his Sergeant smack down in front of him, he didn't escape when Max landed squarely on him. As they went down together with a combined yelp of pain, Adam dropped out atop all three, limply and without comment.

Afterwards, he groaned.

"... Sarge?" Amanda asked, unsure how to take that.

Getting his elbows under him, James looked up. He spared a moment to count... well, knees, from his perspective... then pushed upwards to finish rising. "Radios are dead... tried to call."

"So did I." Amanda responded, still hanging on to Connor. "We took some damage."

"So did we." James reached back for Adam as the other two disentangled themselves, though once he had Adam on his feet, he got leaned on.

"Okay..." Adam mumbled, sounding disoriented, "... that hurt."

"Glad to have you back with us, Adam." James answered. "Can you walk?"

"Oh, my." Adam said, looking down and poking his fingers into the hole melted through his armor. "That's not going to be very helpful." Looking up, he noted all the team was present, then looked over at James, who was still holding him up. "With some assistance, I think so, yeah."

"Good, that's good." James nodded. He'd been afraid there could be internal damage, but apparently not... or at least, none immediately problematic. He would still be sending Adam to the medbay as soon as they finished the mission, though... along with... Connor, he noted, and Alex-1. Sigh.

"Did anyone notice the gunfire down here stopped?" Andrew asked, adjusting the set of his armor now he was free of Max.

"Yeah, it did..." Elliott suddenly agreed, looking behind himself. "I wonder when... I didn't notice."

"Well there goes the only tracking beacon we had." James grouched. "Amanda, do we have five or did I drop in at a bad time?"

She shook her head. "I do not think it's wise to take five, sir, even if we got it."

"Probably smart." James sighed. "Okay, let's be moving then. General direction ought to hold us until the sound comes back. We might just be in a dampening zone."

"Joy... first radios and now sound. What's next... thoughts?" Max grumbled, taking up the TEC as the group moved out. Even limping as it was, they still looked a formidable bunch... and Alex-1 was starting to be able to move on his own again.

9. Thing1 And Thing2

-**Part Nine; Thing1 And Thing2**

It took all of four minutes to get the limping team out the other end of the long hall with the tuning-fork-shaped pylons. But out the other side, they discovered the noise made from fighting with the Hunters had attracted more Covenant, and the way ahead would require more bullets to pass. Hugging the corner with his shoulder, James checked his gear to make sure he was ready to go in. Casting a glance over the team, he pouted for a brief moment, then asked, "Are we ready?"

Amanda looked at him, looked back at the others, then at the soldier on her arm, then back at James. All she said was, "Hoo-ah."

To that, all the others echoed the muted sentiment.

"Okay, fair enough." James shrugged. "Adam, Connor, Alex... you three hang back and back us up if we need it. The rest of you, with me, we're gonna blow a big fragging hole through the middle of them and then run through it. Once it's open it's time to move, so nobody linger back here for too long, understand?"

"Yes, sir." Adam answered. Signature of the team, he was the only one to say it, but it was said on behalf of all. Usually any disagreements got voiced.

"Alright, let's check our gear and go." James said. He waited for a breath while the team sorted itself - Adam, Connor and Alex coming off their respective props and the mobile members moving forward, and everyone checking their ammo counters and spare magazines. Before stepping out after the others, Alex-2 paused and handed Connor a magazine with three bullets in it.

"Here, strip that out and put them on that half-mag you got," he said, before turning away and darting out after the suddenly noisy battle around the corner.

After a punctuation of heavy grenade fire, Alex-1 looked over at Adam and said, "Is there cover out there?"

Adam shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"What's the plan, guys?" Connor asked, thumbing the rounds out of Alex-2's magazine as he spoke. They went directly into the half-magazine of M-7 ammunition he'd used along the way.

Tugging at the ragged corner of his broken chest armor, Adam thought for a moment, then glanced at the corner in question, and said, "Run

fast, run far, fight hard, and try like hell not to die doing it."

"That is the most unenlightened thing I have ever heard you say." Connor groused. "Come on, what's the real plan?"

"Still have any grenades?" Adam countered.

"We're in the back."

"I know."

"This is a plan?" Alex-1 asked, sounding aghast.

"Yes, part of one. It'll probably be best if we have a shotgun for this, because it will likely turn into a close-quarters spiel, so..." Adam paused, then looked back at Alex-1. "When we go, grab the other Alex and hook right down the maintenance airshaft. It'll be about six feet off the floor forty feet down that corridor. Three steps in there should be a sealed hatch on your left. Break it open, squeeze through... lose the buttpack if you have to. Once you're on the other side, you and he can lug Connor's grenades over the lip on the wall to your left, and it'll clear out the flank of the force fighting with the rest of us." Adam pointed at the corner. "When that happens, we'll be able to break the opening Sarge wants and cut through to meet you on the other end of the corridor."

"And... how did you know all that was there?" Connor asked, amazed.

Adam looked at him, hand out. "Grenades." Getting them, he answered, "Because I saw it past an Elite who was looking at a holo-blueprint before we attacked."

"That's some serious memory for a glance." Alex-1 decided, receiving the grenades and stowing them into his belt harness. "What happens if I can't get the grenades over the wall? Or if there's some kind of screen?"

"If there is, just shoot it full of holes, I guess." Adam answered. "Or hell... grenades do have a fuse, if you don't have anywhere real convenient to go you still have about two or three more seconds before it'll kill you to give it another toss."

"Nice. I was disqualified for these things for a reason..."

"So let the other Alex throw it." Adam told him, brightly. "Now let's move up... Sarge is about to call us out."

"How do you know that?" Connor asked, still amazed.

"Sound of the gunfire, duh." Adam said. "Listen - it's more than half plasma shrieks. That means Sarge'll want some kind of reinforcing action or distraction detail, and he's never really been slow to make that decision."

"...oh."

Adam took a breath. "My chest hurts."

"It won't be the only thing that does by the time we're done." Connor decided, feeling antsy now he was out of grenades. Barely was the last word out of him than they heard James holler, and as one the trio darted half-bent out into the raging fray. Plasma shrieked past them overhead, sizzling whenever it struck something and splashing molten droplets of whatever substance that had been outward from the impact site. Adam made it out in front, hit a knee behind Amanda to minimize his minimally armored silhouette, and shouldered his MA5B past her thigh to shoot at the same Elite she was firing her M-7's at.

"Still have any grenades, Adam?" She asked, over the din, as she ducked to the other side of him between his shots. Without any cover at all, it was suicide to stand still, but with a virtually unarmored comrade using her profile to guise his own, it was hard to dart away and leave him there by himself. When she took a trio of shots to the shoulder, it twisted her around, but Adam reached up and planted a hand in the small of her back, stopping her balance from being lost.

"Just one! Connor gave his to Alex!" Adam answered, taking the cue and lifting the last remaining thing out of the hook on his belt. "Where do you want it?"

"Put it past James and Andrew!" She answered, righting her aim and firing again.

"Why there?"

"Just trust me!"

Shrugging, Adam launched to his feet, slung the primed explosive as hard as he could, then let his legs buckle to fall quickly back to a crouch behind Amanda. Grabbing her by the back of her belt, he tugged them sideways in time to miss being grenaded in return.

Up ahead, James saw the dark green pineapple zip past his left ear, and nearly freaked out, but his momentary panic didn't save the two fresh Elites that had just come around the corner from the selfsame chamber where Alex-1 had been told to go. Neither saw the grenade, and in an almost perfect coincidence, both erupted in shrapnel and gore when it detonated between them.

As Andrew yanked James away from a harsh barrage of plasma fire from a rank of Grunts, Alex-1 managed to close the final gap between him and Alex-2. When Alex-2 finished off the last of his M-7 magazine and went to reload, Alex-1 grabbed him by the elbow and hauled them forward. "Come on, got a job for ya!"

"Eagh!" Alex-2 yelped, barely able to keep his feet as he was tugged after Alex-1. Two Grunts tried to get in their way, but when Alex-2 put a shotshell downrange, it killed one and wounded the other, piling them up at the base of the shaft Alex-1 was aiming for. Rather than needing a hand up from Alex-2, he just put a boot on the first dead Grunt and jumped up, reaching for it, still hanging on to Alex-2. They scrambled in, first one and then the other, and when Alex-2 went too far, Alex-1 had to grab him and haul him back when his footing disappeared. "Aaahaaa!"

"Not that way!" Alex-1 hissed, his voice echoing in the short shaft

even over the gunfire just outside the open end. Luckily, it wasn't that dim in the shaft and the sealed hatch proved easy enough to spot - it also looked dandy for kicking in instead of needing to be blown open. Bracing his back to the opposite wall of the shaft, Alex-1 thrust a boot at the door and crumpled it around the sole so it stuck until he retracted his foot. Striking the warped edges of the door on the backside of the opening he'd kicked it through, Alex-1 knocked the door loose and ducked forward to shoulder through. "Come on, hurry!"

"What are we doing? Why are we abandoning the others?" Alex-2 asked, too frazzled to actually protest much beyond the questions. Alex-1 dropped into a neat, tucked flip that landed him crouched on the floor, but on his feet. Alex-2 did a similar tucked flip from his curled position but he landed flat on his back instead, making Alex-1 grateful he'd gotten out of the way in time. "Ugh!"

"Shh!" Alex-1 hissed, grabbing him and hauling him upright. He didn't see a wall that didn't have a top that met the ceiling, but he did see a doorless entryway forty feet ahead and the room was entirely bereft of occupants save the two Alex's. "Come on, we're gonna flank these bastards and blow that hole Sarge wants."

"...oh." Alex-2 began, starting after him. "Oh! Hey, that's amazing - how'd you know about this route?"

"Shut up! You're gonna tell them we're in here." Alex-1 snapped, grimacing at the noise Alex-2 was making. "This is why you newbies are called FNG's!"

"Hey, I'm not that new! And I thought Max was the FNG."

Alex-1 didn't answer, hoping that maybe that approach would quiet the other trooper enough to get the job done without compromising too much. At the doorless entryway, he tucked a shoulder to the corner and peered around, trying to keep his profile as small as possible until he knew what he was going to do.

James was on the floor, Andrew dragging him backwards with what was either a limp or a cut stride due to his dragging load, Elliott, Adam and Max were braced down in front of Connor, who was doing something frantic to one of his armored thigh plates, and Amanda was dancing fast in a harried zigzag in and through the actual enemy forces, stirring them and trying to keep them from assaulting the rest of the team.

"Holy crap." Alex-1 breathed, amazed it would get so bad so fast. Still, Adam's plan was ruined - if he threw grenades into that, he'd kill Amanda too. When she circled around to the front of the group as the Grunts in front decided to ignore the crazy human stirring in their midst, an Elite reached out and caught her by the helmet, stalling out her motion.

In that moment, Alex snatched out Connor's grenades, jerked the pins out of two of them, let the spoons fly and tossed them both simultaneously underhanded so they rolled across the floor and under the mincing feet of the Covenant in the back.

One was kicked, separating the pair, and when they went off, it flattened everyone, even Alex-1.

"Alex!" Alex-2 exclaimed, grabbing him and yanking him back away from the doorless entryway. "What the hell! What did you do?"

"I'm good! I'm good! Let go of me!" Alex-1 gasped, winded but unhurt. "Come on, we have to press before they get back up!" Wrestring free of Alex-2's grasp, Alex-1 jumped through the entryway into the corridor, right into the middle of a bloody mess. Followed by Alex-2, they swept the area as the two sides tried to get themselves sorted and put rounds into the faces of the aliens.

When they were finished, Max stepped forward and put his shoulder into the Elite on top of Amanda, and when Alex-2 helped out, they got the monstrous alien carcass rolled over.

"Amanda?" Alex-2 asked, tentative. He waved a hand over her tinted visor. "You still with us?"

"...uh-huh." She breathed, sounding disoriented. "What happened?"

"Alex threw grenades into their flank. Can you stand?" Alex-2 asked, offering a hand up. When she took it, he pulled her to her feet, where she wavered dizzily for a moment before looking back. "Everyone here? We lose anyone?"

"Sarge - " Andrew began, from where he knelt by the team-lead.

"Oh, great. That's just what we need." Amanda grouched, starting to lurch in that direction.

"You didn't let me finish." Andrew grouched right back. "He's out of it, but he's okay. I think. I'm not a medic."

"Had me worried for a moment, kid." Adam put in. Glancing behind him, he added, "You good, Connor? Can we get out of this grinder?"

"Yeah, one second." He answered, jacking the foam canister's handle and venting a little of the contents into the area under his thigh plate. "Okay, someone help me up. I think I can walk... maybe. I'm not too sure of the idea of any more firefights, though..."

"This has been such a cakewalk." Max griped. "How do you guys do this every day?"

"Hey!" Amanda snapped, getting everyone's attention. "That's enough. You shake yourself apart, you're dead. I won't have that and we don't need that. So get it together, men, this isn't over yet. We still haven't even found our quarry and we aren't leaving until we do. Get everyone up, we're moving forward."

"Hoo-ah!" Connor answered, still sitting on the floor.

10. Last Man Standing

-**Part Ten; Last Man Standing**

James looked better after a few minutes, but Connor was limping seriously and Adam was beginning to drag somewhat, too. Interestingly

enough, Alex-1 seemed spry as ever, if a bit sooty and scuffed. Amanda took point, leading with her M-7 in her dominant hand and the butt of her slung SRS in her other. If she was keeping the long gun from clacking on her ODST rattle, or just using the presence of the rifle to ground herself, it still made for better half-stepping strides down the winding corridors.

Each trooper tried their best to be quiet, stepping sideways and lightly, rolling their feet rather than dropping them, and for several junctures, the team saw no Covenant. Finally, Amanda backtracked. After checking both ends of a corridor twice over, she turned and gestured at Adam. "Adam," she hissed. "This is screwing me up."

"Side chambers, maybe?" He offered, one arm wrapped around his middle. "I got nothing."

"There are no doors here, though." She answered, moving back the other way again. She hooked the corner at that end and looked around, leading with her M-7. "Max, with me. Andrew, you and Alex run up the other end. Don't go far. The rest of you, stay put." She issued, before stepping forward.

Max had to shoulder through most of the team to make the gap, but he trotted to catch up and they made an up-ramp around a forty-five degree curve at the same time. Up at the top, one whole wall was fifty feet of fractured glass panes forty feet high, and the other wall was dotted with force-field doors. Amanda looked at the glass, then at the doors, and clicked her tongue. "Bingo."

"What's the prize?" Max asked.

"Mjolnir armor." She answered, beginning to trot along the line to find the right one. "I don't see him. You?"

"Nope." Max answered. "Where are the controls?"

"Don't see those, either, but this is a good sign... we're close. My HUD NAV is working again, and his IFF is in here somewhere."

"Could be above us." Max issued, stepping towards the glass and prodding it with a finger. Farther up the hall, they spotted Andrew and Alex-2, having come up the opposite end of the same cellblock. "Damnation, this isn't where we need to be."

"Hunches, Max?" Amanda asked, pausing to look back at him and stalling that idea when she found herself facing a gravity-lift alcove tucked expertly into the glass wall. Its fractured nature had prevented the alcove from being obvious, but whatever beyond an open cavern was beyond it was a mystery. "Ah-ha." Quickly she waved Andrew and Alex-2 up, then stepped for it. "Come with, Max."

He jumped forward, catching her gear harness to stay with her as the lift pulled them upwards. At the next floor, Amanda leaned forward, and the lift deposited both ODST's at the lip of the lift in the new corridor. Like the one below, this one was lined on one side by another fifty feet of glass forty feet high, and the other side was dotted with force-fielded doors.

"Ou-la-la." Amanda mumbled, cutting pie left with her M-7 as Max cut

it right with his shotgun. "Think we'll be here a while? Seems to be a lot of these."

"Is this a prison wing?" Max asked, beginning to feel despair. If it was very big at all, there would be problems.

"I don't see any guards, and that tells me this level is likely as empty as the last." Amanda told him. "Back to the lift, let's see what's overhead."

"Yes, ma'am." Max sighed, backing up and joining Andrew and Alex-2 right as they appeared in the lift. "Nothing here, keep going up." He told them, as they continued to rise.

Alex-2 said nothing, and Andrew just gestured with a thumbs-up. As Amanda stepped into the lift under Max, gunfire erupted overhead. "Oh, I don't know if I like being right or not." She said, more to herself than to Max. Collected at the lift, the four grouped at first, then spread and retreated when a grenade was introduced to their location, before charging forward after the last remaining guard. Two Jackals were already down, an Elite on the floor burbling blood but not dead, and another was running backwards away from the scene firing plasma at the advancing humans.

With a few final rounds from Andrew's MA5B, the last Elite dropped, and the first finally stopped gurgling and slumped as they closed the gap to the cell they'd been guarding. On the other side of the force field, the Spartan they'd been sent to extract sat, propped against the back wall of the cell, one knee up and an elbow propped on that knee.

"Is this my pardon?" he asked.

"If I can find the door key, sure." Amanda answered, patting the force field with a hand to see if it was really solid. At the second whap of her palm, however, it turned a phosphorescent yellow, then winked out, leaving the front of the cell open. "Oh! Well. Solves that problem."

"Must be a Forerunner thing." Andrew muttered, frowning at it as the Spartan got to his feet and met them at the opening.

Max tossed him his shotgun, then pulled out the last of the reloads for the thing and handed those over, too. "Here, big guy, go find your guns."

"Thank you." The Spartan said, tucking the reloads into a belt pouch. "I'll do that."

"Let's move." Amanda issued, turning and heading back up the corridor for that lift.

The four ODST's and the one Spartan made their way back to the rest of the team, where the Spartan pointed out the nearest exit route. As one, they made their way through the network heading for a "master-lift" that went all the way to a surface exit. It also went down, to lower levels of the same installation.

Partway there, with Amanda in point, flanked by Alex-1 and Connor, followed up by the Spartan, then Adam, James, Max and finally,

Elliott and Alex-2 with Andrew running TEC, they ran into more resistance. At first, the Covenant - mostly Grunts at first - took the sudden attack badly, and scattered in all directions. But when the first lone Hunter sprinted into sight around the back of a broad piling, they regrouped. Four Grunts lined up with their fuel-rod cannons, and with nowhere to go, the blast blew out Amanda, Alex-1 and Connor right away. The Spartan took most of the rest of the brunt for the remainder of the team, shielding them from the worst of the blast.

The impact knocked him back, tumbling once over his own head as his broken shielding sizzled hotly over his smoking armor. Large chunks of the ablative coating were gone, but it was still intact and still quite thick, capable of taking much more punishment... he just wasn't braced for that. Fire erupted over him, Max taking James' BR to shoot with as Adam, Elliott and Alex-2 opened fire to fell the Grunts as the Hunter stood behind its massive arm-shield. Jackals and more of the Grunts appeared, shooting back, but the Hunter just stood there, as if waiting for something to happen.

When the Spartan got back up, he brought Max's shotgun up with him, and even without full shielding coverage, charged forward to give the ODS'T's time to spread out and find cover. Adam grabbed for the nearest fallen, Max and Elliott pitching in to get their fallen out of the line of fire. Alex-1 started to grab for his rescuer, disoriented, breathless and in pain, but Amanda and Connor never moved.

As the Spartan drew out and flattened the seeming endless waves of Grunts, two Elites appeared, and right on their heels, the missing other Hunter, and two more pairs of the same.

Four lancing beams of heat and energy reached out and swept the Spartan away, sending him tumbling into the wall at the far end of the room. The other two strafed the retreating steps of the ODS'T's, and when Alex-2 and Max tried to draw them to the side, buying time for the rest of the team to regather its wits, first one and then the other were punted off their boots by well-timed leading lances of Hunter fire.

Only Max had the breath to scream when it happened.

With everyone else down and smoking, all that stood between the decimated team, the Spartan, and certain death was Andrew... stepping over Connor, he jerked the SPNKR off his comrade's back and threw it up onto his shoulder, planting himself squarely between a pair of pilings, he focused on the first Hunter.

The first round tore out of the tubes like a banshee out of hell, blasting the Hunter apart and ditching two more from their armor-clad boots. Spines on the backs of all raised, gurgling roars of anger filled the hall, and the two Elites fell back to let them have it. The severed matchtwin of the fallen Hunter lurched forward, gun forgotten, swinging the massive arm-shield on its other arm as it charged at Andrew with unrepentant rage.

Unflinching, Andrew just lined it up, and let go the next rocket. Flames erupted out the back of the tubes as the SPNKR fired, the rocket sailing a minimal eleven feet before auguring through the solid armor on the Hunter's chest and detonating inside the vest.

Bright orange worms splashed out into the room as bits and pieces, ichor and guts sluicing across every surface in the way.

Andrew dropped the tubes from his shoulder, hit a knee, and as the remaining four Hunters all hunkered down and lit their guns, he lifted a reload from Connor's slumped form and slid them down into the tubes. Casting a look at the line of Hunters, he flipped back the catcher and closed the hooks, then deftly stepped one stride to the left and re-shouldered the tubes as the four lancing lines of plasma burned the air to his right. Before any of the four could adjust - within an eyeblink, truly - Andrew had set loose with the next two rockets. The first blew out the second from the left, the second blew back the farthest on the right. The result was all four Hunter's guns went wide and two of them dropped back and began to cool. The remaining two were separated and staggered, and now neither had a matchtwin.

They stared dumbly at one another for almost a full second - enough time for Andrew to drop the tubes, open the back and jerk the next - and last - set of reloads out of Connor's equipment. Off to the right, he could just see the Spartan starting to roll over, picking himself up. It had been a hell of a blast he'd taken, and it was no wonder he'd been so out of it. He wasn't getting up fast enough though, and Andrew knew he had to keep his cool, or what of his team still lived - and he had no idea who, if any, yet - he would need to take care of this himself.

By himself.

They were depending on him, and nobody even knew it. Shouldering the SPNKR tubes, Andrew lined up the first Hunter right as it spied him, and decided he was the reason it was a lonely creature. The duo roared as one, and flew at him as one, and one by one, he blew them apart in fire and blood, leaving spinning chunks of armor and weaponry on the floor amid the enormous pools of brilliant orange blood punctuated by writhing sections of worms.

As the last flame winked out and the smoke began to collect on the ceiling, Andrew dropped the SPNKR launcher to the side, and lifted his own gun, the MA5B, and panned downrange for those two missing Elites.

Cautiously, careful of the wondrous slick on the floor that he'd made out of the Hunters, he began to step forward. There were a number of spaced pilings and a few ceiling-height pylons in the room, and if the Spartan hadn't fibbed, their exit was just through that door. But that still left those two Elites, both of whom were hiding.

He tested his grip on the assault rifle, his senses tingling, his eyes roving all over as he tried to pick out where they might be. Miniscule motion off to the side caught his eye, and he twitched that direction, aiming his MA at Alex-1 for a moment before he realized it was only Alex-1. He turned back to face the far end of the room, and six consecutive Carbine rounds slammed into his chest and shoulders, striking like a rain of fists. His grip on the rifle came apart, the aim went wild, and he staggered back, but before he even had time to fall over, nine more slammed home, and the final three splintered his armor and punched out the back, spraying a fine mist of crimson over the top of the orange slick.

Andrew dropped like a rock, the MA5B spinning out of his hand through the blood and knocking against the foot of a piling several feet away. He looked up as he folded a hand over the holes through his armor, seeing the forming outline of the first Elite as the camouflage engine wore down. Slowly, more outlines appeared, and then color, and finally, shadow. The Elite curled its armor-plated mandibles into a feral smile.

"Impressive... for a Human."

Part of the Spartan could be seen behind the alien, and when the Elite's companion emitted a strangled scream as it went down, the sickening crunch of shattering bones following the alien to the floor, the Elite standing over Andrew spun around, Carbine up.

As if revived by magic, Elliott blinked into existence right over Andrew's head, the mono-molecularly edged eight-inch combat knife slicing the air in an arc from behind him as he sailed in an impossible leap from behind Andrew, aimed for that Elite. He struck, grappled, and brought the knife down, the Elite flinching from impact and reaching back to grab him when the blade sank home, and Elliott's savage scream finally registered in Andrew's mind.

As one, human and Elite piled into the floor together, Elliott hammering the knife into the Elite's neck in a stabbing frenzy a hundred times before withdrawing and standing up. He looked over at the Spartan, standing there with Max's shotgun, then looked back and down at Andrew, and extended a hand to help him up.

Once on his feet, Andrew took his hand down from the broken armor on his shoulder, and looked at the running blood from the hole.

"It's through meat." Elliott told him. "You don't need foam. Come on, we're almost there. Let's get the others up."

"So weird." Andrew mumbled, following Elliott back to the rest of the team, heaped in drifts on the floor. "It doesn't hurt, Elliott."

"It will." Elliott promised. "Especially when they pin a medal on it for you."

11. BandOBrothers

-**Part Eleven; Band-O-Brothers**

"You owe us one." James said, waving a fist at the Spartan.

"One what?" The Spartan asked, the reflection of the sky showing the growing t-shaped dot of the incoming Pelican. He sounded amused.

"Still thinking about that part." The ODST Sergeant answered, looking back at his team. Most of them were sitting down, propped up against one another, with only two still standing up, and one of those was holding him on his feet.

It was a sorry day for the ODST battalion, what with troops that looked like that... still, it was a point of pride that he knew for a fact that no mere Marine squadron could have done half as well... or

hell, even survived. They'd needed to do CPR on Connor when he decided to die on them, but he was back now, grumpy as ever. He had more foam holding him together than anything else, and he would be an absolute nightmare for the medics back ship-side to reassemble properly.

But he was alive... they all were.

And the mission was complete. The Spartan would get redeployed here, but James and his team would not. Their job was done. As the Pelican landed, the ODSs began to sort themselves and shuffle aboard, the Spartan walking casually up across the blood tray to the outermost seat last.

Watching the world soar away as the tray rose and the top door dropped down to seal against it, James looked over his team.

Amanda, Elliott, Andrew, Alex-1, Adam, Connor, Alex-2, Max. All had been beaten half to death, save perhaps Andrew, who had gotten away with just a couple of little holes through one shoulder. But all were exemplary specimens of their creed, and he was proud to know each of them. They stuck together like the family they were, looked out for each other like the team they were, and would carry one another to the very end, like the brothers they were.

And they would all live to fight another day because of it.

End
file.